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Middle school students are leading Island County's war on spartina

OLYMPIA – If you want to know how to get youngsters excited about pulling weeds, ask Judy Feldman or Susie Richards.

Feldman is the WSU 4-H Program Coordinator for Island County and Richards is a teacher and service learning coordinator at Langley Middle School. About two years ago they came up with the idea for the Spartina Education and Eradication Project.

At the time, Feldman was working as the Noxious Weed Control Program Coordinator for Island County, trying to figure out how to teach the residents of Island County about weeds. Operating on a limited budget, Feldman said the only identified project that was funded at the time was Spartina eradication.

“When Susie Richards approached me for information on weeds in our county, looking for a service learning project for her students, we both realized that we could do something meaningful for the kids as well as for the community,” Feldman said.

Spartina is an aggressive noxious weed that displaces native vegetation, destroys shorebird and wildlife habitats and severely threatens the state's shellfish industry. Island County has about 325 acres infested with Spartina, some of it in Penn Cove, where the students will focus their research and energy. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is the state's lead agency in the fight against Spartina in state waters.

Financed by a two-year grant of almost \$41,000 from the Washington Sea Grant Program, the Spartina project began last year with a class of 20 students from Richards' Adventure Education program and a handful of students from Jay Freundlich's science class, both from Langley Middle School. Utsalady Elementary School teacher Curt Chester also got a few of his students involved.

This year about 20 students from Langley Middle School, almost 100 students from Coupeville Middle School, five to 10 students from North Whidbey Middle School and five to 10 students from Stanwood Middle School are waging the war against Spartina.

“In other words,” said Feldman, “it has grown into a truly county-wide project.”

Last week about 36 of the Island County middle school students traveled to Olympia to give a report on their Spartina eradication efforts to Valoria Loveland, WSDA director; and Mary Knackstedt and Kevin Anderson, with the Puget Sound Action Team.

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“This is the kind of energy and commitment that is really going to make a difference in our efforts to eradicate Spartina,” Loveland told the middle school students. “If we could get more young people interested and involved, we’d be a lot further along in our fight. I really want to commend you for all your hard work.”

With their knowledge of Spartina, the students have created story boards, power point presentations, web sites, brochures, videos, and games. They gave Loveland, Knackstedt and Anderson a demonstration of their educational tools last week.

Their next lesson will be actual field work, learning to use hand-held GPS units to collect data for a GIS map of Spartina, and then organize and participate in a dig.

The students’ final assignment will be planning, scheduling, and running a Spartina conference on May 6 at the Camp Casey Conference Center in Coupeville. The conference will allow the students to share what they’ve learned about Spartina. It also will provide an opportunity for local neighborhood associations, civic clubs, and elected officials to learn about the Spartina Eradication and Education Project and what they can do to help.

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